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African-American Resistance to Multiracial Churches

8 Obstacles to Integration

*Appendix: Why White Christians Must Bear the Burden
of Change.*

African-Americans and Multiracial churches – are they compatible?

Dash could run faster than sight. But since superheroes were in hiding he was not allowed to (or at least was not allowed to be seen doing so). Though he knew he was different from other kids in a way that had dramatic potential he was told that “everyone is special” – to which he responded: “That’s another way of saying that no one is.” Later in *The Incredibles*, Syndrome, the arch-villain, unveils his plan to make super-power available to everyone so that: “When everyone is super, no one will be.” The villain’s mission was born from his feelings of resentment at not having super-powers himself and not being accepted for his (also dramatic) potential that overcame his “human” limitations. It is striking to note the sociological themes that resonate through this animated feature for children – playing “the politics of equal dignity” over against “the politics of difference.”

Charles Taylor, in *Multiculturalism*, describes the progress from the pursuit of universal equal dignity (everyone is “special” and therefore has rights) to that of the recognition of the unique identity of people and groups (some of the formerly oppressed are, in fact, “supers” who deserve to be both recognized and unleashed!). In the first,

“Everyone should be recognized for his or her unique identity. But recognition here means something else. With the politics of equal dignity, what is established is meant to be universally the same, an identical basket of rights and immunities; with the politics of difference, what we are asked to recognize is the unique identity of this individual or group, their distinctness from everyone else. The idea is that it is precisely this distinctness that has been ignored, glossed over, assimilated to a dominant or majority identity. And this assimilation is the cardinal sin against the ideal of authenticity” (1994: 38).¹

Miroslav Volf elaborates on Taylor’s thoughts by writing that whereas the liberating Civil Rights movement fought for equity, the new debate over multiculturalism

“Is not about equity. Multiculturalism is about culture. *Its* moral appeal is based on the feeling of many women and gay and non-white Americans that although legal barriers to equality may have been largely removed, cultural barriers remain... The struggle for the equality of individuals belonging to various social groups has given way to the struggle for recognition of communal identities” (1997: 7).

The African-American church is one (and arguably the only) institution that has helped the Black community maintain and develop its cultural identity and that of its individual members. As a result of this fact, and several other obstacles to be outlined below, African-Americans are the racial group it is most difficult to involve in multiracial efforts (particularly churches). Peter Hong, the pastor of a multiracial church in Chicago’s Logan Square observed that African-Americans are far more difficult to attract and involve (in even their already diverse church) than any other ethnic group (11/23/2004).

The thesis of this paper is that the reasons African-Americans are reluctant to join multiracial churches include eight obstacles that have largely been erected by white people. Therefore, after discussing these obstacles I will propose that white people in general and white evangelicals in particular must bear the majority of the burden for removing and crossing these barriers. If we envision the eight obstacles as walls that are ten layers high, white people should be responsible to dismantle nine of those

¹ Dash and his sister Violet not only struggle with “not being normal” but later, when they need to utilize their unique powers, have difficulty doing so. Could this be due to their limited identity development from being pressed into the mainstream mold for their entire childhood?

layers without removing the responsibility of the black community to do their part in moving toward unity and reconciliation. Historically, however, white people have either ignored, denied or downplayed the existence of these obstacle and have largely blamed African-Americans themselves for any problems that might actually exist (Emerson ____). This introduces the first and largest obstacle: history.

Obstacles to African American Involvement in Multiracial Efforts:

1. **The Obstacle of Historical Oppression**

Most white people think of the oppression of black people as a far off memory that should long ago have ceased to be an issue. The facts of history, however, paint a very different picture. “A survey of African-American history reveals that like the children of Israel, we have had a four-hundred-year collective trauma from which we have yet to fully recover” (Ellis 14). From the brutality of capture and “the middle passage” to the abuses of slavery itself the plight of the African slave was one of unthinkable agony and distress. Regular plantation practices included “kidnapping, rape, promotion of sexual immorality for profit, destruction of the family, dehumanizing of the human race, torture, and murder – many times in the name of God” (Shuler 70ff; 120). “The series of traumatic shocks involved had such an effect upon the Africans that their personality development was altered to suit the image and likeness of a system that assumed their inferiority” (Ellis 42).

After a brief taste of freedom and equality after the Civil War, Reconstruction failed. “The former slaves were thereby abandoned to the devices of those who wanted to reestablish White supremacy. As a result, a neo-slavery emerged – a system of oppression rooted in political disenfranchisement, racial segregation and exploitative economic relationships that subjugated Blacks to Whites” (Ellis 54). The election of President Hayes, the withdrawal of federal troops from South Carolina and the 1883 Supreme Court ruling that the Civil Rights Act was unconstitutional “led to incredible acts of violence against blacks in the 1880s and 1890s. Lynchings increased as well as assaults by the KKK. Neither the white church, the white academy (the schools), nor the white Supreme Court opposed it” (Shuler 124). In 1890, *Plessy v. Ferguson* made “separate but equal” segregation the Jim Crow law of the land.

After 1900, the black surge northward came at the cost the black family (Shuler 90). Discrimination in housing, education and employment isolated almost the entire black population into urban ghettos while every other ethnic group was consistently able to escape (Shuler 103). In 1954, segregation technically ended; but the reality was far different. When the hero of the Civil Rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr., was assassinated in 1968 - for many, his dream perished with him. Every year during black history month a story is recounted of a young black boy named Emmet who lived in the segregated world of the early 20th century (Washington 44). On his way out of a candy store a white friend of his asked Emmet what he thought of the young white sales lady. He whistled in humorous admiration. That young woman’s brother found out about this assault on her character and several days later Emmet’s body was found beaten to death. Naturally, no one was ever convicted of a crime (Shuler 188). As we will see in the second obstacle, these stories are not ancient history but are fresh tragedies that remain open wounds.

Something else that keeps the wounds from healing is the way U.S. history is often taught with emphases that downplay African-American contributions. For example, most whites are not aware of the Black contributions to Christian ministry and missions or to America through a multitude of inventions, sacrifice in war (esp. Civil War), service in slavery, the founding of schools and leadership during Reconstruction (Shuler 69ff). One glaring example of this is that “the crowning act of [Lincoln’s] presidency” is often presented as the Emancipation Proclamation (Shuler 110). Historical evidence, however, demonstrates that without the consistent influence of Frederick Douglass, that historic

proclamation may never have been issued (Shuler 98). When Lincoln asked Douglas to speak on the fourth of July the eloquent Black spokesman proved the point:

“Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in Which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine” (July 4, 1862 – Shuler 115).

The most disturbing reality in African-American history is not only how recent and how terrible the abuses have been but how whites and even white Christians have so often been the oppressors. At first, it was not permissible for slaves to be converted because then “they could no longer be slaves, and baptism would be tantamount to emancipation.” So in the late 17th century laws were enacted ensuring that conversion would not result in release from slavery and the result was that “Christianity and slavery were *fully compatible*” (Ellis 44). This disconnect coupled with the brutalities of slavery led Frederick Douglas to exclaim:

“Between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference – so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels” (Frederick Douglas; Ellis 20).

Rather than fighting for the freedom of equal brothers and sisters in Christ, most preaching (including that of Evangelical hero Jonathan Edwards) “was designed to reinforce the Englishman in his view of blacks and to instill contentment in the slaves for ‘their God-appointed lot in this life’” (Shuler 119). Throughout the violent atrocities against black people in the 1880s and 1890s “the white evangelical church was strangely silent” (Schuler 125). As recently as the 1960s, many fundamentalist Christians (like Bob Jones and his sons) made comments like: “A Negro is best when he serves at the table... when he does that, he’s doing what he knows how to do best...” (Schuler 99). Martin Luther King wrote of the greatest tragedy in Birmingham:

“Certainly Birmingham had its decent white citizens who privately deplored the maltreatment of Negroes. But they remained publicly silent. It was a silence born of fear – fear of social, political and economic reprisals. The ultimate tragedy of Birmingham was not the brutality of bad people, but the silence of the good people” (Ellis 74).

Unable to depend on white Christians for help in areas of injustice, “blacks have had to depend on the government for help... sometimes it was the white Christian brothers who were the source of the injustices” (Shuler 100). “Historically, through its neglect in not confronting the problem, the white segment of the church has allowed itself to unwittingly become a co-conspirator with the enemy” (Washington 109).

The institution of the Black church has not emerged from a historical vacuum but is the direct result of White oppression. It is a fact of history that the Black church predated the Black family by decades because of the atrocities slavery inflicted on Black families. With emancipation and then the failure of reconstruction, Black churches “main function was to accommodate their members to their subordinate status in White society” (Ellis 57). African Americans made various attempts to find their place in America. When efforts to assimilate were met with rejection by Whites, the result was “self-hatred, feelings of inferiority and economic stress.” Then, “the church became largely a secular institution focused on organizing community affairs and improvements in housing, education, etc “ (Ellis 63-65). Martin Luther King was able to rally the Black community together by applying the theological depth of Biblical liberation with the social practice of Ghandi’s non-violent resistance. This work cannot be explained merely as a “people movement” with sociological principles. It “cannot be explained without God” (Ellis 72).

In contrast to King’s theologically based efforts in the North, Malcolm X worked “for the uplifting of the Black man” on the (eventual) basis of secular humanism (Ellis 110, 114). His premise is revealing of the Black perspective today: “The concept of Black Power rests on a fundamental premise: Before a group can enter the open society, it must first close ranks” (Ellis 114). Black secularism and Islam failed to unite the Black people culturally and actually “gutted the very soul of the militant Black movement... Thus far the historic African-American church has produced the only unified soul dynamic in the African-American community. In fact, history shows that no Black movement has survived for long apart from the Black theological dynamic” (Ellis 127). Ellis argues that this is not the White man’s religion (White Christianity-ism) but is the Christianity of Christ expressed authentically in an African-American context. He concludes his comparison of Malcolm (South) and Martin (North):

“We can thank the Southern stream for showing us that freedom and dignity are not found in the melting pot. We can thank the Northern stream for showing us that freedom and dignity are not found within ourselves” (135).

The historical obstacle provides the foundation to understand the other six, since they all flow out of a tragic and abusive story. It is easy for the “dominant class of people in a society...[who] have the agenda in their hands” to be future oriented and expect everyone else to “let go of the past.” Unlike the majority class, “The oppressed class has history!” (Perry 94). Two more quotes sum up the argument thus far:

“This track record of historical failure makes it difficult for blacks to begin or continue to trust white Christians” (Shuler 92).

“It has taken more than 400 years for Americans to develop the dysfunctional racial relations we have today... overcoming these unhealthy race relationships will not happen overnight” (Yancey 123).

2. The Obstacle of Present Injustice

It cannot be denied that “racial tensions continue to demoralize, enrage and explode,” as the L.A. riots demonstrated on a national level (Washington 23). “The problem is that the past is *today* for most blacks” (Shuler 126). What for White people seem to be tragic but ancient stories are day-to-day occurrences for people of color.

“When a black person is willing to be honest and really express what he or she feels the white person is often shocked at the intensity of feeling about racism. But the reality is that racial discrimination has scarred or touched every single black person to one degree or another; it’s alive today, like a burn that has never

completely healed, so the 'skin' is very sensitive. The black person may not want to risk being honest, fearing another burn" (Washington 166).

The personal experiences of Black people frequently confirm their suspicion that the system is tilted against them. From sideways glances in suburban stores to disproportional police attention to radical disparities in educational and vocational opportunities it is clear that our land of opportunity is not a land of equal opportunity (Perry 91). Consider the fact that if 8% of a neighborhood becomes black the White population is statistically guaranteed to begin its flight (Yancey 130). This is obviously very insulting to people of color; but churches also follow this pattern, "strategically" relocating to less diverse areas. This is a Black man's take on the American system:

"It is impossible for a chicken to produce a duck egg... The system in this country cannot produce freedom for an Afro-American... And if a chicken did produce a duck egg, I'm quite sure you would say it was certainly a revolutionary chicken!" (Ellis 89).

We cannot simply try to be "colorblind" – ignoring the historical abuses of groups like Native Americans whose land we live on, and African Americans who have continually been pushed aside (residentially, educationally) so the affluent could advance. "In this sense, African Americans today are still paying for the historical discriminations past generations faced" (Yancey 26). Because many whites are not interested in fighting *institutionalized racism*, we remain silent and "allow injustice to continue in the social, political, economic, and criminal justice realms of America" (Shuler 129). Many are willing to help, "as long as it doesn't cost them anything" (Shuler 131). White blindness to racism is somewhat understandable:

"Maintenance of the basic racial controls is now less dependent upon specific discriminatory decisions and acts. Such behavior has been so well institutionalized that the individual generally does not have to exercise a choice to operate in a racist manner... The individual only has to conform to the operating norms of the organization, and the institution will do the discrimination for him" (Harold M. Baron – Ellis 150).

Since we, as White evangelicals, have been trained to see the world through the lens of human free will and responsibility it is difficult to see beyond the choices of individuals to the systemic abuses that occur every day. But our inability to see the injustices does not make it any less of an obstacle to our relationships with African-Americans – in fact, it is one more way that we add a layer to the obstacles that already exist.

3. The Obstacle of Theological Emphasis

In retrospect we can see how outrageous it was to believe that African slaves did not have souls or that the color of their skin represented the curse of God (Ellis 47). Although these more blatant theological insults were eventually abandoned, a divide still exists between the theological perspectives that generally characterize White and Black cultures. White reaction to liberalism and the "social gospel" caused many fundamentalists to abandon all social action and focus entirely on saving souls. "They wrongly identified social action with *liberalism* rather than Christian action" (Ellis 56). Whites interpret sin, salvation and sanctification individually often ignoring the corporate dimensions (Perry 56). This leads Blacks to ask: "What is the gospel to the socially comfortable?" (Perry 73).

“From this perspective, for example, the Exodus means not only a symbol of deliverance from spiritual slavery, but also a physical and temporal deliverance from evil structures to a better life (in some sense) in the present... evangelical theology, though biblical, is far from ‘culture-free’... and tends to reflect the concerns of its predominantly white constituency” (Perry 57).

White “theology had led them to a preoccupation with private salvation... much more concerned with *epistemological* issues than with *ethical* issues... in White conservative circles... the test [of orthodoxy] tends to be *conceptual*... while in the African American church the test tends to be *existential* – that is, how well one personally knows God... and *situational* – that is, how sensitive and committed one is to actualizing the truth of God’s Word, or how obedient one is to the ethical implications of Christ’s teachings” (Ellis 81, 83,86).

“Since the African-American struggle has been against ethical wrongdoing, the theology of African-American church has been essentially ethical... a struggle against personal, institutional and legal wrongs that attempt to negate our humanity, our culture and our constitutional rights” (Ellis 48).

“The evangelical gospel does not address the six basic needs of black males, which is why many of these males may turn to the Nation of Islam. These six basic needs are *dignity, identity, significance, pain, rage and the need for remasculation*” (Shuler 140).

Not only do Black Christians view sin and salvation with a more ethical emphasis than Whites, Black theology has given expression to Black culture and I wonder if the two can or should be separated at this point.

“Given that Biblical Christianity intends us to worship God in our culture, we can see that the African-American theological dynamic is a legitimate expression of the biblical message. It fully qualifies as African-American, having historical and cultural continuity in the Black experience. This satisfies our need to be African-American. Yet it does not have merely ethnic origins; it is rooted in the universal Word of God. This satisfies our need to transcend Blackness. One thing is clear: the theological dynamic does not qualify as the White man’s religion” (Ellis 152).

The danger, from a Black perspective, is that their contextualized expression of Biblical faith would be watered down or completely lost if placed into a multiracial setting.

4. The Obstacle of National Politics

Flowing out of the different theological positions (and cultural lenses) comes a nearly universal political polarity between Blacks and Whites. Barbara Williams Skinner, the wife of racial reconciliation preacher Tom Skinner expressed this dilemma well:

“Although there is much talk about diversity, multiculturalism and racial reconciliation, actual understanding between the races is at an all time low. The prison industry explodes but affirmative action is being rolled back. White Christians charge head on against homosexuality and abortion but jump into reverse when it comes to fighting poverty and racism. All of this appears as solid proof that the white community – including white Christians – really does not care about the plight of the black community” (Shuler 127).

White Christian Republicans deny a lack of compassion (though they would avoid at all cost the label of 'bleeding heart'), arguing instead for a different strategy – but the message Blacks hear remains the same and only heightens the divide on this point. Consider the example of affirmative action:

“Many blacks, Christian and non-Christian, tend to view white evangelicals who are against affirmative action as anti-black” (Shuler 161). “Blacks know that whites have benefited by the color of their skin, which is affirmative action, if you think about it... race has always been an issue in America. It may be easier to ignore if you are in the majority, but the problem still exists” (Shuler 139).

We could also look at the expansive discrepancy in per student funding in suburban schools over against urban schools and several other issues related to politics. But the point is this: “Ultimately it is not Black versus White. It is justice versus injustice, haves versus have-nots” (Ellis 91).

5. The Obstacle of Church Politics

A consistently recurring theme in Black writings is power – who has it and who does not. One African-American pastor said that he would become nervous if too many White people began attending his church because “they are so used to taking over.” His concern would certainly apply in a multiracial setting, especially if the lead pastor was not an African-American himself. “Many white evangelicals are used to being, and expect to be, in charge” (Shuler 149). Shuler points out the common problem in white evangelical ministries of hiring a “token” minority leader but withholding or later withdrawing real authority to make changes (Shuler 42,150). He observes that the *wrong* question is “How can I relate to African-Americans?”

“Because the reality is that Christian African Americans see white America as controlling the economy and real estate, starting businesses and white parachurch ministries, even going overseas as missionaries – all without asking for input from African Americans... it looks like they are looking for a way out of developing a serious relationship with African American Christians.” (Shuler 38-39).

Without question, in order to have a ministry that effectively attracts and engages African-Americans, significant leadership positions (and arguably the lead pastor) must be held by African-Americans. “The absence of minority presence in evangelical leadership questions the integrity of the Gospel proclaimed by these same evangelicals” (Shuler 150 citing Dr. William Pannell). Thus, ministries must go beyond simply being multicultural in the sense that “several different races are present” but should become “cross-cultural implying interaction from all and thus learning from all the cultures and races that are present” (Shuler 60).

6. The Obstacle of Cultural Expression

An understanding of the history of the Black church removes any surprise at the fact that it has developed a cultural expression of Christianity miles apart from that of the White church. Unlike White believers who have several other predominantly White social institutions, Blacks have historically had no other place to develop their cultural identity. The natural result is that, “Blacks fear losing the last truly African American institution – their churches” (Shuler 128). The painful fact is that the Black church actually predated the Black family by decades because of the horror of the plantation system.

“As a social group the Negro church may be said to have antedated the Negro family on American soil; as such it has preserved, on the one hand, many functions of tribal organization, and on the other hand, many of the family functions. Its tribal functions are shown in its religious activity, its social authority, and general guiding and coordinating work; its family functions are shown by the fact that the church is a center of social life and intercourse, acts as newspaper and intelligence bureau, is the center of amusements – indeed, it is the world in which the Negro moves and acts. So far-reaching are these functions of the church that its organization is almost political” (W.E.B. Dubois in Nelson p. 77).

Later, with widespread segregation, “The church remained the most powerful institution in the black community” (Shuler 90).

The Black church is the center of Black cultural life: building strong and dynamic black leadership, social and leadership skills, advancing political and public policy interests, improving their communities, and reaching inner-city youth and those needing financial help to attend college... while receiving spiritual encouragement for the struggles of life (Shuler 129). One of the greatest obstacles to Black involvement is their resistance to needing White people. This is because “one of the strengths of the black church... has been its function as a significant institution wholly owned and operated by blacks in a white-dominated society” (Washington 178).

Added to the fear of losing their only cultural institution is the basic multicultural challenge of finding an expression of church that sufficiently values African-American heritage. This is an area in which the divide between races is greater for African-Americans than any other ethnic group. Blacks approach worship, preaching, ministry, fellowship, and evangelism from a perspective markedly different from White people. African-Americans tend to be more emotionally (and verbally) involved in worship and preaching. As a result: “some African Americans feel that whites aren’t really spiritually in tune” – they appear to be the “frozen chosen (Perry 63).” Black spirituals are an artistic outpouring of “soul” (Ellis 43) that served as light for the people “in the darkness of bondage” (Perry 67). White choruses often focus on victory while Black hymns draw frequently on the theme of suffering. The context of Black worship is empowered by the ‘move of the Spirit’ and the peoples’ participation in the event. “This is why expressions are chosen not for their rational value but for their emotive value, not for accuracy but for beauty” (Ellis 49). Freedom songs, “the soul” of the Civil Rights movement, “are as old as the history of the Negro in America. They are adaptations of the songs the slaves sang – the sorrow songs, the shouts for joy, the battle hymns and the anthems of our movement” (Ellis 75). The musical styles of Black and White worship are as different as classical and jazz: “Just as classical music has developed musical composition into a fine art, jazz has cultivated musical improvisation into a fine art” (Ellis 174).

African-American preaching, like their music, also has a “jazz” approach that “sweeps listeners into verbal and emotional responses (Ellis 176). The distinct advantage of this approach is that people are required to get experientially involved with the message. Jesus did not “give his disciples a course outline and lecture... he said, ‘Follow, imitate and be involved with me’ (Ellis 177). Black preaching focuses on providing encouragement and inspiration for the needs of the day while White preaching tends to focus more on the precisely exegesis of a Biblical text (Perry 67). This difference was the spark that ended up torching Circle Church in Chicago. The Black pastor was not allowed to preach “The Funky Gospel” – an act that African-Americans call “silencing the pastor.” This pastor accused his White counterpart of “denying a black preacher full and free expression and destroying the principle of the open church” (Kehrein 78). He went on to say: “As a black man I can no longer have a white person tell me what to preach and how to preach. I won’t be throttled; I must be allowed to speak prophetically” (79).

Cultural differences also pervade other areas of the church such as fellowship, ministry and evangelism. Many Whites feel that entering church should be a reflective time to focus on meeting with God; while Blacks often use that time to boisterously fellowship with one another “as a communal aspect of worshiping God” (Perry 72). White churches tend to focus more on individual’s relationship with God and have little social relevance. Black people, on the other hand, often select churches based not on doctrine but on meeting their temporal needs. Again, this difference is rooted in history: “Black people who have been socially deprived attempt to find churches that try to meet their temporal needs, which means they sometimes focus more on the cultural experience of a church than on its doctrine” (Perry 73).

Finally, since many African-Americans have been drawn into the currents of either black secularism (focusing on cultural needs like poverty and justice) or Black Nationalism via Islam (focusing on personal discipline and self-control) the Black Church is intentionally trying to reach these “wayward brothers.” The central purpose of Carl F. Ellis’ book, *Free at Last?* is to serve as an apologetic attracting those disillusioned with secular humanism to the power and theological depth of true (Black) Christianity. He calls for “a fresh approach to applying the good news to these contexts. We need a new mode of African-American Christianity – a mode that, among other things, would include new models of the church to correspond to these subcultures.” (194). He adds that “Such new manifestations of the church, incidentally, would not necessarily be all African-American” but does not develop this statement except to say, “Certainly we should not want to replace the traditional church.” And the overall goal would be to “involve a majority of *our* people once again” (195, italics mine). These thoughts lead me to the conclusion that Biblically grounded African-American churches will be (at least temporarily) necessary to win much of the Black population in our country. “The local church is a cultural, not a biblical, phenomenon. The believer is free to do whatever the Bible does not prohibit” (Perry 73 citing Walt Henrichsen). If we accept this ecclesiological assessment then we must at least allow and probably promote the reproduction of African-American churches nationwide.

7. The Obstacle of Sociological Identity

As noted in the introduction, minorities that once fought for universal equality are now calling for recognition of their unique communal identities. Charles Taylor likens the effects on minorities of non- or misrecognition to the example of women in patriarchal, (e.g. Arab) societies.

“Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being” (Taylor 25).

As a result of years of this historical oppression, minorities are now advocating “the politics of difference” in which blindness to differences is replaced by preferential treatment for those very differences. “To the proponents of the original politics of dignity, this can seem like a reversal, a betrayal, a simple negation of their cherished principle.” The problem is that rather than a temporary measure to level the formerly biased playing field (e.g. through affirmative action) the goal of these new measures “is not to bring us back to an eventual ‘difference-blind’ social space but, on the contrary, to maintain and cherish distinctness, not just now but forever. After all, if we’re concerned with identity, then what is more legitimate than one’s aspiration that it never be lost? (Taylor 39,40). So a philosophical tension results between the (generally) White and Black perspectives.

The Black view says that difference-blindness “negates identity by forcing people into a homogenous mold that is untrue to them.” This mold is not a culturally neutral one but is, in fact, “a reflection of one hegemonic culture,” that of the majority. In this way the apparently fair society “is not only inhuman (because it suppresses identities) but also, in a subtle and unconscious way, itself highly discriminatory” (Taylor 43). Thus, one of the greatest needs of Blacks is “to demonstrate to ourselves and the world that we are an honorable people, with a rich and valuable heritage; that we hold a meaningful place in biblical history; that in ancient civilizations we were kings and queens; and that we are spiritual and mature” (Washington 228). “A central theme in the flow of African-American history has been the quest for freedom and dignity” (Ellis 30). “Dignity, respect and self-esteem must be taken into consideration, and in fact *encouraged*, when seeking to develop a relationship with a people who have been oppressed or feel they have been” (Shuler 192). Taylor concludes:

“There must be something midway between the inauthentic and homogenizing demand for recognition of equal worth, on the one hand, and the self-immurement within ethnocentric standards, on the other. There are other cultures, and we have to live together more and more, both on a world scale and commingled in each individual society” (Taylor 72).

This obstacle represents one of the Black church’s greatest fears: the loss of their unique cultural identity that exists nowhere in our segregated world except in the church. It can even be a challenge for African-Americans to admit that White people understand them (Kehrein 75) much less to admit any kind of need for Whites. Nevertheless, one Black pastor was courageous enough to cross the rubble of this barrier that he saw was demolished by the blood of Christ:

“As a black Christian, I (Raleigh) agree that the black community should affirm the dignity of our culture and celebrate our contribution to society. We need to take responsibility for the needs of our families and our community. But as a black Christian working in the impoverished inner city, I will take the risk and say, ‘I need my white brother. I need Glen Kehrein. And I need him not only because he’s Glen, but because he’s white.’ ...without Glen as my partner I would not be complete.” (Washington 179-180).

8. The Obstacle of Psychological Fear

I was surprised to discover from conversations with Black Christian brothers and sisters that they were not interested in pursuing racial reconciliation. Their reluctance, however, is very understandable when set in the context of their experience. How many times would you try something if every time you did you came away emotionally wounded? Black-White relationships in our country almost always begin on the shaky platform of distrust (Shuler 167; Perry 97). Because of consistent disappointments, even after emotional “Promise-Keepers” type experiences of forgiveness, many Blacks have given up on reconciliation. “Black people are not interested in racial reconciliation... Black people want freedom” not emotional exercises that alleviate white guilt. Blacks do not want to provide an “easy way out” for white Christians who don’t want justice but simply want an absence of conflict. “White evangelicals never broke their necks to bring Blacks into fellowship with them, and so now they wonder why Blacks are not anxious to be reconciled?” (Shuler 135).

The foundation of distrust was laid hundreds of years ago in the plague of corrupt plantations. “The sexual exploitation of the slave woman caused a tangled net of trouble for everyone” – rupturing trust between black men and white men; between black men and black women; between white men and white women; and between white women and black women (Ellis 52). Today, African-Americans are

tired of waiting. “More than thirty years [after MLK], black Christians are still waiting for equality and acceptance by the majority of their white Christian brothers and sisters” (Shuler 174).

Conclusion:

The White church is guilty of erecting barrier after barrier to keep our Black brothers and sisters at a distance, often deliberately casting them aside or ignoring their plight when others had done so. Yet now we wonder why they are so reluctant to join us in *our* inspiring vision of diversity. African-Americans have fought long and hard, through unthinkable suffering, to establish a strong and beautiful ethnic identity. The Black church has been their one consistent foundation, the sole anchor for a people without a land. Yet we wonder why they are slow to leap from its deck.

The Appendix below outlines a few steps toward tearing down these obstacles but these will only be a beginning on the long road to unity. My basic conclusion is that there are several valid reasons (and some less valid ones) for African-Americans to maintain and promote their distinct culture in and through Black churches. However, as more and more White Christians open our eyes to the pain of their past and present and begin to work sacrificially to show love for our brothers and sisters those walls will begin to crumble. Then, as both sides make space within ourselves for “others” by aligning ourselves with Christ over culture and comfort we will experience the blessings that abound in blending of to amazingly rich and surprisingly different expressions of Christianity.

Appendix: *Why White Christians Must Bear the Burden of Change:*

One of the basic rules in my home is that whoever makes a mess must help clean it up. History has demonstrated that the current situation of injustice is largely the result of White discrimination, much of it caused by “Christians” or condoned by the silence of the White Church. “The black church we know today is the result of racism... While blacks feel they tried the racial harmony game, whites have not demonstrated a willingness to come onto blacks’ turf” (Shuler 129). Therefore it seems only reasonable that White church should shoulder the majority of the burden in overcoming the obstacles she has helped put in place.

“Drawing on the resources from their own rich tradition, the Christian churches should be at the forefront of the struggle for a just peace between cultures. Often, however, they seem helpless in the face of the sinister powers that stir hatreds between cultures and animate destructive urges. Sometimes they even find themselves accomplices of the evil that they have either been too blind to perceive or too impotent to resist. Occasionally they can be found among the worst perpetrators.” (Volf 9).

“The evangelical church, so dedicated to foreign missions, has neglected the desperate needs of the inner cities of our own country for too long... we have abandoned our brothers and sisters in Christ to gang violence, poverty, prejudice, racism, hopelessness and fear... To remain silent is to deny the fundamental truth of the gospel – the power of God’s love to break down the walls of separation between us” (Washington 29,30; cf. Eph. 2:14-16).

I, a suburban White boy, do not presume to suggest any solutions of my own but will simply outline the proposals I have heard from Black authors. They include: studying and valuing Black culture, empowering Black leaders, taking action to promote justice (rather than talking about doing so) and partnering with African-American brothers and sisters for the cause of justice (not the purpose assimilation). My conclusion after this eye-opening exercise is that if White Christians approach Black Christians calling for the establishment of multiracial churches the effort will have a 20 year old string’s chance of lifting up a semi. However, if White believers rally together for the causes that concern our Black brothers and sisters and effect them every day of their lives – this “one-another” love, enfleshed in action, will break through the high walls of distrust and, by the grace of God, open the way for multiracial relationship and ministry in the future. Then the world will marvel at the power of the Gospel and the 400 year wound on the face of the Church will begin to heal. “Bringing like people together proves nothing about the power of the gospel, but when you bring dissimilar factions together in peace – Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, blacks and whites – you prove God’s power” (Washington 181).

Step one is clearly to **learn**. African-Americans (and other minorities) have been required to study “American” History from a primarily White perspective so it seems reasonable for Whites to make an effort to study the history and culture of our African American brothers and sisters. “Any ministry of whites to blacks must be preceded by adequate exposure to black culture, history and tradition” (Shuler 130,132).

Though learning is necessary as a prelude to the second step – to **value Black culture** – learning alone is insufficient. White people must, in a sense, create space within ourselves and our value system for the “otherness” of African-Americans:

“To embrace others in their otherness must mean freeing them from oppression and giving them space to be themselves. Anything else is either a hypocritical tap on the shoulders or a deadly ‘bear hug’” (Volf 40).

This space-making can only occur if we first achieve a certain distance from our own culture and find our primary identity in Christ, not culture. “No human culture can be given greater weight than adherence to our faith in Christ” (Yancey 48, cf. Jn. 4:4-42). “The distance from my own culture that results from being born of the Spirit does not isolate me, but *creates space in me for the other*. Only in distance can I be enriched, so that I, in turn, can enrich the culture to which I belong” (Volf 44). In this process, “exclusion cannot be given up... Distance that results from being born of the Spirit... entails *a judgment not only against a monochrome character of one’s own culture but also against evil in every culture*” (Volf 45). So valuing the uniqueness of our Black brothers and sisters does not mean turning a blind eye to sin but it does mean opening our eyes to the beauty that exists beyond the world we know.

Throughout any engagement between these historically divided peoples repentance and forgiveness must be liberally applied. My thesis implies that White believers should emphasize repentance and Black believers forgiveness but both must be present on both sides or the obstacles will never be fully removed. In a Christian context a refusal to forgive is not any more of an option than a decision to deliberately exclude others. The story of the prodigal son shows that “The exclusion of the other is the exclusion of *God*” (Volf 49). The unity purchased on the cross and the forgiveness that became possible as a result is the only hope for ever achieving on earth the unity that will exist forever in heaven. Volf expresses well the power of forgiveness:

“Forgiveness is the boundary between exclusion and embrace. It heals the wounds that the power-acts of exclusion have inflicted and breaks down the dividing wall of hostility. But it leaves a distance, an empty space between people that allows them either to go their separate ways in what is called ‘peace’ or fall into each other’s arms” (Volf 58).

The third step, after learning and valuing in an atmosphere of grace, is to **take action**. African-American theology has an ethical emphasis and history has revealed plenty of talk from White Christians but all too little action (Shuler 132). We have historically sat around asking “How?” and “Why?” “Start doing something!” (Shuler 40). I have become convinced that the barriers are so significant that without authentic and sustained service alongside our Black brothers and sisters in causes they care about (and following their initiative) those obstacles will remain firmly in place. I have also seen that a direct approach calling African-Americans to join us in establishing multiracial churches is not likely to succeed. This is largely due to “race fatigue” – people are tired of the issue and of seeing no results (Yancey 100). Therefore an indirect approach is preferable that will begin with the pursuit of social justice and gradually build toward a more complete unity in the church.

A key to this action is the service must be horizontal (alongside), not vertical (on their behalf). Black leaders have rightly questioned the term “reconciliation” because it implies the restoration of a relationship that was once healthy and positive – this is obviously a misnomer when applied to Black-White relations in the United States (Shuler 117). Shuler suggests the term “**Racial Partnership**” because then equal parties are involved, working toward a common goal that we cannot achieve on our own but that is worth the sacrifice (Shuler 142). A careful examination of our motives will be necessary on this point: “If your motives are anything less than serving the whole person and understanding the issues of the black community then there is an excellent chance that your ministry will neither be accepted nor effective” (Shuler 194).

In order to partner effectively with African-Americans we must form real relationships with them.

“I believe the true road to reconciliation will involve whites coming on our turf, eating our food, listening to our music, and being uncomfortable as they experience faith, history, and culture through our eyes. It is not enough to come in as a tourist who returns home with souvenirs and a pen pal but rather as someone who has come to be among us” (Shuler 133 citing Andres T. Tapia).

Some White believers may be called to relocate, moving to a more diverse area. “More Christians need to move out of the South and the Midwest and into the new cosmopolitan global centers and give their lives to see the new church emerge” (Yancey 135).

A significant part of the action that has been historically absent and that is a prominent concern for African-Americans involves politics, the pursuit of social justice and equal opportunity. White churches have tended to downplay or ignore the role of politics so a significant change in this area could go a long way to proving the authenticity of all five steps. Martin Luther King said it well: “It’s about justice versus injustice not black versus white.” “Real, genuine reconciliation would mean that Whites would start a war with Whites to make sure that black people got what they need in terms of justice” (Shuler 138 citing Rev. Eugene Rivers). It has been argued that “The oppression [Blacks] face today is less racially based than economically based” (Ellis 202). Policy changes in our country will take time (if they ever become “just”) but in the short term partnerships between Black and White churches could at least begin to creatively address some of the economic disparities that exist. One example would be a major effort in education. This might include the creation of entirely new alternative institutions in Black areas (utilizing the resources of the White church) or, in the meantime, supplemental programs (Ellis 198).²

Without question the pursuit of justice should not become the primary purpose of the church. “Liberation is insufficient... Liberation alone will lead to self-oppression, because a liberated ungodliness will always do its thing, and that thing is sure to bring death (Rom. 6:23). But this should not excuse us to give up the fight for freedom. We should fight for freedom *because* it is not enough” (Ellis 189). This is nothing more than “love your neighbor” – something we have neglected for too long.

The fourth step is to truly **empower Black leaders**. “The glass ceiling must be shattered. As long as people of color are not in decision-making positions in churches, parachurch organizations, seminaries and Christian publications, true reconciliation cannot be complete... shared power would be proof of the dominant culture truly treating us as equals” (Shuler 134). This means bringing on black leaders in the idea stage of ministry efforts. Usually white leaders start a ministry and then (from guilt?) find a minority leader to “bring their group along.” “White leaders birth the project. Once it is up and running, minorities are only then asked to join, promote, and support this new work of God. Basically, minorities are an afterthought... [and] often feel used” (Shuler 148, 193). The majority group must give minorities: 1) access to power ‘in the mainstream’ and 2) the opportunity for self-determination – ‘to bring their own agenda’ (Perry 95). One concrete application of empowerment is that Black leaders must have authority to spend their budgeted money the way they see fit (Shuler 193-194).

This leads logically into the fifth and probably most uncomfortable step for White Christians because this is where cost and sacrifice come in. The fifth step is to **make ministry changes** that reflect

² Ellis also calls for a great effort to reform family life, the body life of the church, the economy (particularly for black people), and the policies of our nation. His summons assumes that the black church is on its own and does not seem to include the possibility of assistance from whites. I suppose he has learned from history and knows better. Yet I wonder if his reluctance is based on an assessment of reality (white churches will not be a part of the solution) or if it is based on a conviction (white churches should not be a part of the solution). Perhaps the role of white Christians and churches should be to prove wrong that well-grounded assessment of reality. Only then will we begin to demonstrate that our love is authentic and our efforts determined and not just short-run to alleviate some guilt.

African-American distinctives. “You cannot do business as usual when another culture or race is to be included in ministry” (new patch on old cloth)... “therefore a climate for integration must be created which demands that some of the old traditions, which are not biblical, go before the minority even comes to work” (Shuler 153).

Such changes are the opposite of the traditional White assumption (hope?) that all minorities would simply assimilate into the White majority culture. The problem with this “melting pot” assimilation idea is first, that it never existed and even more: “that it dissolves the difference” (Volf 46). “Blacks have grown tired of always being the ones who have to do the changing in order to make peace, and even then, meeting opposition” (Shuler 41,128). “If multiracial churches become a mechanism by which the values within racial minority cultures are eradicated, while no demands are made upon European Americans, then such churches may become the boarding schools of the 21st Century,” like the earlier ones that sought to kill the Indian in order to save the person (Yancey 38). We must culturally adapt to the numerical minority groups because these groups pay a higher price relationally for attending a diverse church for they are less likely to connect with many people (Yancey 146). Volf explains well why churches should embrace, not assimilate, the other:

“Why should I embrace the other? The answer is simple: because the others *are* part of my own true identity. I cannot live authentically without welcoming others – the other gender, other persons, or other cultures – into the very structure of my being. For I am created to reflect the personality of the triune God... The Spirit of embrace creates communities of embrace – places where the power of the Exclusion system has been broken and from where the divine energies of embrace can flow, forging rich identities that include others” (Volf 59,60).

Carl Ellis provides a call to African-American believers to beware of ethnic identity for its own sake:

“As an absolutized ideal, Afrocentrism, like absolutized Blackness, will turn out to be another restrictive box... Black is beautiful, but it is not beautiful as a god. As a god it is too small... As an absolute [Afrocentrism] will infect us with the kind of bigotry we’ve struggled against in others for centuries... True ethnic identity will be impossible if it is based on ethnic identity itself” (154).

He goes on to describe the blessings of cross-cultural fellowship:

“The various [contextualized] Chstianities must balance between the spiritual unity and cultural diversity, just as different cultures interact, borrow from each other and blend. We cannot allow cultural variation to become walls of cultural isolation, as it did in the US and South Africa. In an atmosphere of cross-cultural fellowship, the pollutions of Christianity-ism in my culture will often be more clearly seen by someone of another culture; we all have blind spots” (Ellis 169).

“The Joshua generation should not be limited to African-Americans only. It should transcend African-American culture as it has a redemptive effect on America at large. The crosscultural aspects of the Joshua phase would help keep it from being spoiled by Christianity-ism” (Ellis 204).

Multiracial will also be attractive as a witness to an increasingly multicultural nation. “You can’t escape the fact that homogeneity feels like elitism... there are a lot of people in this city that will not believe in a message that is spiritual if it doesn’t express itself in a global, holistic way” (Yancey 47).

This is not to say that “a monoracial church is a sin, in and of itself.” Some have “no opportunity,” or a specialized calling. But clearly more than 8% of our churches should integrate beyond the 80/20 (majority/minority) standard (Yancey 50).

The vision of Dr. King is still a vision of unrealized hope for many African-Americans today.

“Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over, and I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land.” (Martin Luther King Jr., Apr. 3, 1968 – Shuler 219).

Perhaps the Spirit of God is beginning to nudge the door open that has long been locked shut between Black and White Christians. I believe that if White believers will begin to show authentic, lived-out love for our African-American neighbors then that door may open still further, creating opportunities for multiracial unity as yet unexperienced in our nation.

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